

**Testimony in support of HB 6533: An Act Concerning a Department of Correction Advisory Commission**  
**Judiciary Committee Public Hearing, March 24, 2009**

When there is some kind of crisis related to the prison system, the media and the politicians focus on it, and the public learns about it. Wouldn't it be better to have an ongoing independent body whose mission is to look at various aspects of our prison system **all during the year**? A Commission of this type, composed of both legislators and community representatives, would decide what areas to assess. They would file reports and suggest remedies and legislation when warranted.

Some areas of interest to the public that might be looked at on an ongoing basis by such a body are **Prison Health, Public Safety, and Rehabilitative Programs for Prisoners**.

What are some examples of public health information the public needs know?

We need to know the numbers of individuals with HIV and other serious ailments so that when people return to our communities, we know what help will be needed.

We need to know whether DOC, with over 19,000 inmates to take care of, is able to handle individuals' medical needs in a timely fashion so that care is cost-effective, and all staff and inmates are protected from dangerous contagious diseases. As for mental health and drug treatment, we need to know how many people are re-entering our communities who did not actually get treatment inside, or not enough treatment, because DOC was not able to provide it to the large number of inmates who needed it.

Safety concerns are of course very important to the public. DOC has no choice but to accept whatever number of prisoners are sent by the courts. Family members want to know if overcrowding is endangering employees as well as inmates. Are there really adequate bed and sanitary facilities everywhere?

Another safety concern is gangs that develop inside. The public needs to know where these groups will be going when they leave prison. Is there any kind of re-entry assistance specifically focused on gang members, to try to promote better outcomes when they return to society, and which communities should know about?

Programming is another important area. How many incarcerated individuals are only on waiting lists for educational, job-training and rehabilitative programs that would have been helpful to them when they are released, had they been able to get into these programs? What is needed to enable everyone to get into useful programs?

Any state agency receiving millions of taxpayer dollars should be very transparent, and that means an **independent** entity specifically authorized to take a look. In some cases an outside body might expose problems that need fixing; in other cases they could assist DOC in getting more attention to and funding for areas of need. In the long run, everyone would be better off.

Theresa Lantz, the current Commissioner of Department of Correction, has added Preparation for Reentry into the Community to the mission statement of DOC, and we commend her for it. But the public still needs to know how the program is being carried out and whether it is leading to successful transitions. Although some directors of agencies may believe that they will not be able to do their job well if outsiders are observing them, we believe that if an agency is working smoothly, transparency should be no detriment; in fact, an outside entity could be very helpful in advocating for more funding for positive but under-supported activities and needs of an agency. That is why I, and my organization in New Haven, People Against Injustice, are supporting HB 6533 to create a DOC Advisory Commission. Knowledgeable community members, plus advocates for African-Americans & Latinos, Women, and Persons with Disabilities (some of whose constituents are either incarcerated or employed by DOC), will join with elected officials to create the kind of independent body of observers that every state's taxpayers deserve. Connecticut can become a model, as it often is, for other states to emulate.

I also support the following bills which relate to the tasks of a DOC Advisory Commission: HB 6685, which requires prison facility data; HB 6704 and SB 543, which will reduce the incarcerated population; HB 6031 and SB 537, which will prevent recidivism; SB 349 and HB 6581, which will reduce the number of people going to prison.

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